

THE
PRINCIPLES AND EXTENT
OF
CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE
CONSIDERED
IN A
SERMON,
PREACHED BEFORE THE
GOVERNORS OF THE LEICESTER INFIRMARY,
AT THEIR ANNIVERSARY MEETING,
SEPTEMBER, 16, 1794.

By R. HOUSMAN, A. B.

The love of Christ constraineth us. 2 Cor. v. 14.

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TO
THE RIGHT HONORABLE
THE EARL OF STAMFORD, PRESIDENT,
TO
THE RIGHT HONORABLE THE VICE PRESIDENTS,
TO THE RIGHT REVEREND THE VISITOR,
AND
TO ALL THE GOVERNORS
OF THE
LEICESTER INFIRMARY, AND LUNATIC ASYLUM,
THIS SERMON,
PREACHED AND PUBLISHED WITH THE VIEW OF
RECOMMENDING AND SUPPORTING
THOSE EXCELLENT INSTITUTIONS,
OF WHICH THEY ARE THE PATRONS,
IS NOW, WITH ALL DEFERENCE AND RESPECT,
INSCRIBED BY THEIR OBLIGED
AND HUMBLE SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

A D V E R T I S E M E N T.

Deference to the opinion of others has determined the Author to present this Sermon to the world.

He is not insensible to the condescending politeness of the Governors of the Infirmary, whose testimony of approbation has been transmitted to him by their Secretary: and he is encouraged to hope, that a publication, which concurs with their wishes in attempting to promote the interests of the Lunatic Asylum, now in its infancy, will meet with their patronage and support.

It may not be improper to observe, that the three first pages of the discourse were almost wholly omitted in the Pulpit, through a fear of trespassing too long on the indulgence of the Audience. But when it is considered that they originally formed its beginning, and that the observations they contain are obviously suggested by the Text, all further apology for their introduction will be deemed unnecessary.

THE
PRINCIPLES AND EXTENT
OF
CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE &c.

GAL. v. 6.

For in Jesus Christ, neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.

THAT the religion which God Almighty has condescended to promulgate is adapted and adequate to the removal of every misery to which sin has exposed the world, is a truth very generally acknowledged, however partially or faintly it may be felt. A religion founded upon principles of such extensive benevolence, and which offers its blessings, with a liberality worthy their magnitude, to "every creature", however limited his capacity, however obscure his situation, however loaded with transgression,—such a religion, one might imagine, needed only to be published, to arrest and fix the attention of every mind, to excite admiring and thankful love within every heart, and to call forth enraptured and unceasing hallelujahs from every tongue.

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But alas ! man is not merely, through his transgression, a child of sorrow and of wrath, he is likewise the servant of depravity ; and it is only upon our admitting his depravity, and admitting it in all its dreadful latitude of degree and consequence, that we can rationally account for the following mysterious and melancholy facts,—that Christianity, though it is the express image of the moral excellence of its Author, has been treated as if it had neither “form nor comeliness,”—that Christianity, though its beauty depends upon the mutual relation and connection of its several parts, has been unfairly and absurdly mutilated,—that Christianity, though it describes a moral disease of which all are the subjects, and reveals a remedy which all are invited to participate, has met with an opposition as determined and virulent, as if, instead of offering an antidote, it increased and confirmed the malady ; as if, instead of discovering, and endeavouring to allure into, the path of eternal glory, it led down, by some delusive or irresistible power, to the chambers of everlasting darkness.

Whilst in every age of the Church the religion of the Son of God, in its most essential parts, has proved “a stumbling block” to some, and appeared “foolishness” to others, not a few, even of its pretended advocates, have given mournful evidence, that though they boasted of its excellency they mistook its nature, though they professed its doctrines they perverted its design, though they were willing to bow the knee at the name of Jesus, they were equally willing to “crucify him afresh.”

It would have been well if these disgraceful and destructive evils had lost their frequency or their effects through the lapse of time : it would have been well, if, in an age which boasts of pre-eminent discernment, we had known nothing of error but from its description in the bible, nothing of its consequences but from the detail of the historian. Alas ! a very limited and transient observation of the state
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of the moral world will too easily and too fully convince us, that antichristian sentiment and conduct still continue to exist and triumph.

On the one hand, we behold the Antinomian. This man, who is asking of his conscience a licence to transgress, who is attempting to combine the indulgence of his lusts with the hope of heaven, the favor of God with an opposition to his will,—this man seeks refuge from his fears under the unauthorized and unhallowed persuasion, that a mere assent to the great truths of the Gospel will suffice to his eternal peace. But what is the language of such a system as this? It proclaims that the Son of God is confederate with the prince of darkness; that he came down from heaven, not to raise mankind above the ruins of the fall, but by conniving at, to give a sanction to, their iniquity, which is at once the degradation of their nature, the source of all present misery, whether felt or feared, and the parent of that worm which will never die.

On the other hand, we discover the Advocate for human merit.—This man, who, looking through the dazzling and deceitful medium of inordinate self-love, imagines that his duties have a brilliancy which must command admiration, and a magnitude which will not only counterbalance his sins, but establish a claim upon his God,—this man, equally with the character already considered, mistakes and perverts the Gospel, endangers and destroys his immortal soul. For if we divest him of the glare which his own presumptuous delusions have thrown around him, what shall we behold? A creature risking eternity upon actions, which have been always defective and as often defiled; a sinner, the habit of whose soul should be profound abasement, and the exercise of whose lips importunate supplications for mercy, exalting himself into a claimant upon Divine beneficence; a rebel, invited by stupendous compassion to pardon and to blessedness through the blood of a Redeemer, venturing, with equal ingratitude and arrogance, to divide or to contest with that Redeemer
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the praise of his salvation. In a word, we behold a creature, a sinner, and a rebel, pleading his own polluted obedience, and, of consequence, pleading a neglect of the blessed Jesus, as the ground for an admission to the favor of a righteous God, and to the glories of his eternal kingdom.

Equally remote from Pharisaical haughtiness and Antinomian profligacy appears the great Apostle of the gentiles, whether we examine his doctrine, or scrutinize his conduct. He always associates, with a provident circumspection, faith and practice, promises and commands, privileges and duties, affording to each a due proportion of regard, assigning to each its proper place. Of his watchful attention to this beautiful and necessary connection we have a cloud of witnesses in each of his epistles. I have selected one from the number to be the subject of the present discourse. *"For in Jesus Christ, neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love."*

This is Christianity: and if we would understand its nature and penetrate its design, behold its excellency and rejoice in its blessedness, we must contemplate and possess its graces, in their combination and order as exhibited in the Gospel.

The words of the text suggest to our consideration the two following points.

I. The nature and the office of *"faith."*

II. Its energy and effects: it *"worketh by love."*

This discussion will lead me, by a very easy and obvious transition, to recommend to the usual, nay I will venture to add to an *increasing*, exertion of your benevolence, that valuable Institution,

tion, in the behalf of which I have this day the honor to plead ;—that so not only its permanency may be secured, but its benefits extended,—that it may be furnished with the means, not merely of diffusing its accustomed blessings, but of folding within its beneficent arms a new and a most melancholy description of objects, which have every possible claim upon our tenderest sympathy, our firmest protection, our most effectual succour*. I consider

I. The nature and the office of "*faith*."

The christian believer has yielded a sincere and a feeling assent to the divine position, that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." With a seriousness and an anxiety, becoming an immortal upon the verge of eternity, he has "called his ways to remembrance:" he has reviewed the prevailing principles by which he has been actuated, the affections, tempers, and imaginations he has habitually indulged, and the manner in which his time and his talents, his mercies and his faculties, have been severally employed. The retrospect which Conscience thus faithfully exhibits, is neither gratifying to his pride, nor productive of peace. He stands convicted at the tribunal of his own heart, of having, in instances beyond the reach of calculation, opposed the will, violated the law, and trampled upon the honor, of the Lord his God.

But further. Another declaration of the bible, solemn, unambiguous, and decisive, has engaged his attention and constrained his belief; "All the world is become guilty before God". His reason and his fears had taught him the *probability* that vengeance is the desert of transgression; the scriptures of eternal truth have established the *certainty* of the awful fact. He therefore submissively acknowledges that "the wages of sin", yea of *his* sin, "is death"—an

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* The LUNATIC ASYLUM was this day opened for the reception of patients.

everlasting exclusion from the kingdom of glory, and a participation of these horrors, which no vigour of imagination can comprehend, which no lenity will relieve, and no time must terminate. Hence, he stands before his God abased, alarmed, and confounded. He opens his lips, not to deny or to palliate his transgressions, but to confess them in all their deformity of ingratitude and insult, and attended with the hateful aggravation of careless or of obstinate repetition. He presents himself before his Judge, not to arraign the equity of the sentence which condemns him, but to pour out his humbled heart, in the meek but importunate spirit of the Publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

We are now contemplating a transgressor of the law of God indulging a disposition suitable to his character, and imploring pardon with an earnestness becoming his situation. We are contemplating an offender surmounting the disgrace, and escaping from the misery, of the fall;—for we are contemplating one, to whom the promises of the Gospel are directed, over whom the Angels are beginning to rejoice, and upon whom "the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity" is looking down with complacency and love*.

But let us accompany the believer in his transition from fear to hope, from anxiety to peace, from gloom to exultation. He has been taught by the word and the Spirit of the Lord, that a deliverance, which man had neither wisdom to devise, nor goodness to attain, nor strength to effect, has been fully and for ever accomplished by the Son of God. He has been taught, and he credits the animating assertions, that "That eternal life which was with the Father" "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant,"—that this condescending and wonderful Personage "became obedient to the law for man," "suffered for sins, the just for the unjust,"

* Matt. v. 3. Luke, xv. 10. Isaiah, lvi. 2.

“unjust,” and, after he had “overcome the sharpness of death, opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.” Hence, he perceives a beauty, and he feels an attractive energy, in the sacred and conclusive position, “Other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” To this foundation he eagerly approaches; and he rests upon the Saviour’s “obedience unto death” for present security and peace, for final and complete redemption. He does not, and he dares not, associate with the blood of Immanuel his own duties, whether religious or moral: he *does not*, because he is assured that the atonement of the cross is as extensive as his iniquities,—he *dare's not*, because he is informed by the same authority, that if he ventures upon the experiment “Christ shall profit him nothing.”

We have now attained, I trust, a scriptural idea of that faith, with which salvation is connected. It is preceded by a view of the evil, and an apprehension of the consequences, of sin: but its grand discriminating property consists in making that the alone ground of our hope towards God, which alone has satisfied his justice for our sins. In a word, it is a principle produced in the heart by the power of the Divine Spirit, the object of its regard and reliance is Christ crucified, and its fruits are “Glory to God in the highest, and goodwill towards men.”— This idea leads me to consider

II. Its energy and its effects: it “*worketh by love.*”

We have already accompanied the believer to the time, when, impelled by necessity, allured by invitations, and encouraged by promises, he ventured to trust in the Redeemer for mercy and for peace. The consequences of his unreserved affiance are immediate and glorious, extensive and everlasting. His “unrighteousness is forgiven, and his sin is covered.” Though ungodly, he is justified*. Though
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* Rom. iv. 5.

he had yielded subjection to the prince of darkness, he is now become the charge of Angels*. Though he had lived to no better purpose than to neglect and insult his God, he is now restored to his favor, and made happy in his love. He dares to call him Father, and to expect from him all that tenderness which uncreated Goodness can manifest, and all that protection which Almighty power can afford. He is assured by promises, neither few nor ambiguous, that, in his passage through a dangerous and a miserable world, he shall receive wisdom adequate to every difficulty, courage or support adapted to every conflict, consolation or patience proportionate to every distress. He is further assured, that when the last tremendous moment shall arrive, when the earth shall "reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man," and "the powers of heaven shall be shaken," he shall be sustained in confidence amidst the general convulsion, and be carried in triumph through that hour of vengeance, which reduces the world to ashes.

Imagine him to have these expectations, grounded upon the immutable faithfulness and mercy of Jehovah, and to possess a true, though inadequate, idea of that misery from which he is redeemed, of that "exceeding and eternal weight of glory" to which he is reserved, and of the tender compassions of that Redeemer, at the expense of whose humiliation, sufferings, and death, his deliverance and blessedness were purchased, and then enquire, What must be his emotions, what his prevailing dispositions? The bible has afforded us an answer. "Having much forgiven him, he loves much". That original and sacred law, which sin had obliterated, is again written upon his heart. His affections are transferred from vice and vanity to his adorable and adored Benefactor. To feel the vastness of his obligations forms the essence of his happiness, and to evidence a becoming sense of them, by the unaffected effusions of gratitude,
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* Heb. i. 14.

and by the silent tribute of an obedient life, is his aim, his prayer, and his glory.

But his love to God is productive of a love to mankind, pure in its principle, and exalted in its degree. Himself the object of the most stupendous benevolence, his heart is softened, and, in a measure, molded into the same image. He reveres and he bows to the authority, which commands him to consider himself as a member of one common family, composed of all people, nations, and languages, created by the same Father, partakers of the same nature, comprehended in the same invitation of one glorious Gospel. Indulging these views, his soul is expanded; he rises superior to the sordid selfishness, in which he had been ingulphed, and he experiences the delight of that sacred principle, which "seeketh not her own." Hence, if he be not diffusing blessings with a liberal and an extended hand,—if he be not a father to *all* the fatherless,—if he make not *every* widow's heart to sing for joy,—if he be not visiting the African in his affliction, to rend asunder the chain which avarice has forged, and infernal cruelty has riveted;—if he be not traversing the moral world, that he may teach the guilty how they may sing of pardon, the captives of deliverance, and "them who have no might" of the succour of an everlasting arm:—in a word, if he be not dealing happiness through the whole creation, and making earth appear the vicinity of heaven, the reason is this,—his means and his opportunities bear but a scanty proportion to the extent of his desires, and the fervour of his supplications.

Say now ye suspicious advocates for Morality, whether *salvation by grace* betrays or promotes her interests. Say, what can inspire that Benevolence, which seeks its direction from the word of God, and proposes, as its end, the honor of his name,—which can comprehend within its grasp the whole world of beings, and maintain its vigour though frequently called upon to communicate,—which

can preserve its fervour, under the chilling requital of ingratitude, and persevere in its progress through misconception or calumny, satisfied and thankful if the sum of human misery be diminished, and the approbation of God secured. Adopt the sentiment of the Apostle, and say, THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

The discussion of the origin, nature, and extent of christian charity, very obviously leads me to consider in what ways, and to what degree, the desires of the benevolent may be fulfilled, by a generous encouragement of that Institution, for which I am appointed to plead.

1. The afflicted poor meet with that seasonable assistance, which, by removing their affliction, divests their poverty of its poignant evil. Let us suppose a labourer or mechanic arrested in the career of his industry, by the mysterious but holy providence of God, and laid upon a bed of sickness. All those simple sources of satisfaction, which the goodness of the Lord Almighty has opened for the comfort of the indigent, are at once dried up. Departed is that enjoyment which arose from a cessation from daily toil,—gone is that pleasure which resulted from the reflection, that the pittance he had earned would support the family he loved,—fled are all the mild and rational delights of domestic intercourse. Perhaps, by the persevering efforts of labour, and by a watchful frugality, he had accumulated a little hoard, for the support of a widow, or the benefit of a child. This hoard is resorted to and alas! is soon exhausted; and though he has expended but little, the heart of sensibility will feel that he has expended *his all*. But he is not a solitary sufferer, nor is it from the combination of his own pain and necessities that his misery principally arises. His near connections are bending under the calamity; and whilst *they* are feeding upon the bread and the water of affliction, every pang is augmented, the scene, which was at first gloomy, assumes a darker aspect, and, to use the language of inspiration,

ration, the "iron enters into his soul." Is the assistance of a Parish requested? If a refusal can be given with impunity, a refusal, in many instances, may be expected. If relief *be* afforded, it is not unusually afforded with a parsimonious reluctance, which embitters the miserable pittance; it is not unusually afforded with insult and reproach, as if calamity were a crime: for alas! the prevalent mode of *farming out* the poor, has given birth to a system of oppression, which issues at once in the increasing obduracy of the oppressor, and in the aggravated distress of the needy and afflicted.

To rescue from this pitiable state of wretchedness, to impart, under God, the glow of health where sickness had exerted its ravages, to give to a depressed and a desponding family "the oil of joy for mourning,"—this is the glorious employment of the present hour. Heart will surely vie with heart, and hand will emulate hand, in this godlike work of beneficence and mercy.

2. A second reason, upon which I would ground an earnest solicitation of your liberality, arises from *the circumstances of the times*.—Attempts are made by the sophist, under the guise of argument,—by the insolent, under the mask of bold integrity,—by the lawless and disobedient, under the specious and lovely form of liberty, to persuade the poor, that they are bending under oppression, which they never felt, and treated by their superiours with a contumelious neglect, which they never observed. You have now an opportunity of exercising the most enlarged benevolence, by endeavouring to counteract the artful and malicious delusion;—the delusion, which has a manifest tendency, and is perhaps intended, to excite that tempest, which would overwhelm in one common ruin, our security and our peace, our religion and our laws, our comforts and our all. By encouraging an Asylum, opened for the comfort of the lower orders of the community, where their wants, in the hour of affliction, are supplied, and where their pains and maladies are mitigated or removed,

moved,—they will see and they will feel, that they are not the objects of that contempt, which Anarchy would persuade them to imagine, nor exposed to any calamity, which Opulence refuses to commiserate and relieve. Thus, the oblations of christian love may prove the oblations of patriotism, and he who this day has “pity upon the poor,” may be found, and that not remotely, a supporter of the Kingdom.

3. I feel myself under a peculiar obligation to solicit no common exertion of your munificence, because our charitable Institution is about to extend its hospitable shelter, and, we trust, its healing blessings, to that most pitiable class of our fellow-creatures, who exhibit our common nature in melancholy and complete desolation. The **INSANE POOR**, for whom I am this day a feeble Advocate, are unable to plead their own cause. Unable did I say? I retract the word. There is a language in their situation, there is an eloquence, both in their mischievous wildness, and in the silent gloom of their despondency, which pleads more forcibly than could the tongue of an Angel. They address you through that state of degradation and helplessness to which they are reduced, and this is their address:—“We are Strangers, O! take us in,—Strangers to the dignity of acting by a perfect, or even by a precarious, rule, for the light of revelation reaches not our benighted intellects, and the lamp of reason is put out in darkness;—Strangers to the comforts of social and domestic intercourse, for we are the burden and the grief of our connections, the terror of the timid, and the sport of the profane;—Strangers to the love and the enjoyment of our God, for we are precluded from his worship, cut off from the glorious privilege of seeking his favor, and are incessantly liable to rush into an awful eternity, without a summons, and perhaps without a preparation. O! then have compassion on us and help us.”—That this language is energetic and effective, the contributions of the present hour will, I trust, abundantly testify. An emulation purified from selfishness,

an ambition sanctioned by the Gospel, will, I hope, be in ardent and vigorous exercise, whilst we are uniting in the sublime endeavour to restore, in every possible instance, man to himself, a member to society, a comforter to his family, a worshipper to his God.

4. The fashion of this world passeth away. The time is advancing, the moment is pressing hard upon us, when the groans of affliction and the voice of mirth will alike be stifled in the dust; and when we shall have received, at the bar of unerring and final decision, an irrevocable sentence, either to eternal life and a "crown of glory," or to "the bitter pains of everlasting death." It follows, therefore, that a charitable institution, which, whilst it provides for the removal or alleviation of present calamity, looks forward to the world of spirits, and studies the welfare of the immortal soul, has claims upon our regard, strong, peculiar, and even infinite. These claims I would urge with earnestness, in behalf of the Leicester Infirmary.

By a wise and pious appointment, the objects of our present attention, when not incapacitated by the nature or the degree of their disease, are statedly required to join in that admirable form of worship, which for spirituality and copiousness of sentiment, simplicity and reverence of expression, bears no faint resemblance to the language of inspiration. They enjoy, likewise, the invaluable privilege of hearing the word of God published and expounded; of having its doctrines elucidated, and its precepts enforced; of having its awful sanctions pressed upon the conscience, and the rich treasures of redemption exhibited in all their magnitude, and in all their freeness. The effect has not altogether been unworthy the design, nor the means of grace unaccompanied with grace from on high. That a moral change has been produced, clear and determinate in its nature, beneficial and permanent in its effects, proofs, repeated and decisive, might readily be adduced;—proofs, which should constrain the adoring acknowledgment, "This is the finger of God;"—proofs,

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which will stimulate every benevolent heart, to abound in this "work of faith," this "labour of love."

Let us for a moment dwell upon the animating idea, and contemplate a character which has been softened and impressed, renewed and made happy, within the walls of your Infirmary.

You received him enveloped with ignorance, and wandering in the path of obliquity and ruin; you send him forth in the possession of that knowledge, which is connected with "life eternal."—You received him either a timorous or a fullen slave of his lusts, filling up the measure of his sins, and anticipating the dreadful reward: you send him forth, rejoicing in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made him free, and exulting in a hope full of immortality.—You received him a burden and a pest to his fellow-creatures: you send him forth an ornamental and an useful link in the social chain.—You received him prepared, perhaps, by habits of transgression, for tumult, rapine, and rebellion: you send him forth under the influence of Gospel principles, and *therefore*—thankful for the protection of equal laws, thankful for the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty, thankful for the mild and beneficent administration of a gracious Sovereign, whom he has now learned to reverence; for the Scripture which has taught him to fear his God, has taught him, with the same perspicuity, from the same authority, and under the same tremendous sanctions, to "Honor the king."

But let us accompany him to the concluding conflict, and then follow him beyond the confines of the earth.

He who might have manifested, at the awful hour of his departure, either gloomy silence or despairing horrors, feels that Almighty support, that efficacious consolation, which can give him a triumphant composure amidst the agonies of dissolution, and sustain
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his hopes, whilst eternity is opening before him, and a God of immaculate purity is presented to his view.—He who, at the morning of the resurrection, might have been calling on the mountains to fall on him, and the hills to cover him, lifts up his head with confidence and rapture, for he recognises a Saviour in the great Arbiter of his doom, and beholds his complete “redemption drawing nigh.”—He who might have been appointed to a trembling station on the left hand of the Judge, and sentenced to the bitter and endless employment of “weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth,” is associated with his friends, and called upon to bear a part in that chorus of gratitude, adoration, and joy, “Blessing, glory, honor, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever.”

But are these various, exalted, and eternal benefits confined to the individual, who has been instructed, pardoned, and renewed? No: the blessing he has received may be as extensive in its effects, as it is excellent in its nature. When he ceases to be the charge of your beneficence, he comes forth into the world to “make manifest the favour of the knowledge of Christ,” and to “let his light shine before men.” He has a family, whom he can exhort with authority; he has a neighbourhood, to whom he can preach by his integrity and kindness; he has fellow-creatures in every corner of the earth, for whom he can importunately pray, and upon whom he may draw down the everlasting riches of the salvation of God.

Thus, “a little leaven may leaven the whole lump.” The advantages received in your House of Mercy, may be felt and increasingly diffused through the successive ages of the world: nay, they may assist in bringing forward that glorious and predicted period, when “the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea.” A stronger argument for your liberality I cannot urge: may its energy reach every heart, and may the effects of that energy be
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such a contribution, as will issue in the glory of our God, in the immediate comfort, and in the final and perfect blessedness, of immortal souls! Amen.

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